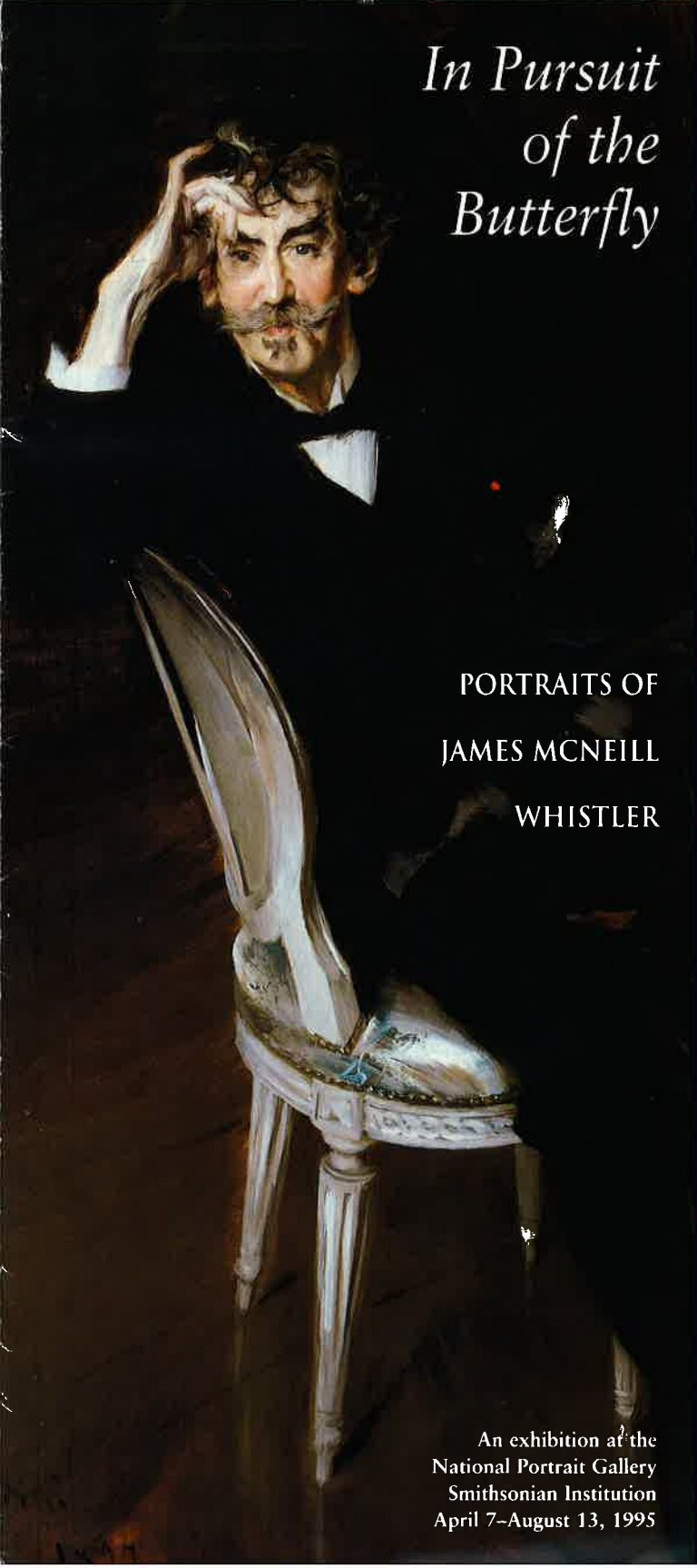


In Pursuit of the Butterfly

PORTRAITS OF JAMES MCNEILL WHISTLER

An exhibition at the
National Portrait Gallery
Smithsonian Institution
April 7–August 13, 1995

Whistler was a diamond with many facets, and being also a poseur, he presented himself at different angles to different people.

— G. S. Layard,
The Bookman, October 1912

THE AMERICAN EXPATRIATE James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) was a towering figure in nineteenth-century European art. In addition to his major accomplishments as a painter and printmaker, he was an important theorist, arguing for the appreciation of the formal aspects of painting at a time when the preeminence of narrative was unquestioned in England. Whistler's own revolutionary style, his striking appearance, and his adversarial nature all attracted the attention of numerous caricaturists and portraitists throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. "In Pursuit of the Butterfly: Portraits of James McNeill Whistler" surveys the diverse ways in which he was represented by his peers, by his students—and by himself. Over the course of his storied life, Whistler became the single most depicted artist prior to the twentieth century. More than one hundred artists—painters, photographers, caricaturists, and printmakers—portrayed him, from the age of ten to his death at the age of sixty-eight.

Whistler's Artistic Achievement

Whistler was born in Lowell, Massachusetts, and though he spent less than fifteen years of his life in the United States, he always considered himself an American. In 1855 he went to Paris to study painting, where he came into contact with both the academic art of the period and a younger generation of experimental French artists. Settling in London in 1859, Whistler himself became a major link between the avant-garde painters of these two important artistic centers. While closely identified at the outset of his career with Gustave Courbet and the realist school of art, he soon turned to other artistic concerns. Whistler was among the earliest painters to

Self-Portrait by James McNeill Whistler. Etching, 1857–1858. S. P. Avery Collection, The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, The New York Public Library, New York City, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

absorb the exotic non-Western style of Japanese art, melding traditional European subjects with the abstract decorative attributes of Asian art. As a result, his own paintings—both the portraits and the nocturnes, landscape images that evoke the mists of the Thames River at dusk—became increasingly concerned with decorative aesthetic effects. During his long career, Whistler strove to perfect an art of harmonious tonal effects realized through the most economic means, subordinating the details of his subject to an emphasis on overall aesthetic composition.

The Creation of an Icon

Throughout his life, Whistler attracted publicity because of his unusual style of dress, his obstreperous conduct, and his unconventional paintings. His costume was an amalgam of the fashionable and eccentric, including, at various times, diverse hats, monocles, wands and canes, coats and cloaks, and the trademark white lock that sprang from his black curls. In the early part of his life, Whistler was known for his quick temper and fisticuffs; his later battles took place during well-publicized trials in the law courts of London and Paris. Through the

Portrait of Whistler by Charles Corwin. Monotype, 1880. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City; The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1960 (60.611.134)

conscious construction of a Whistlerian character, he garnered personal notoriety and publicity for his work, while simultaneously helping to establish the precedent that the artist alone should control the exhibition and reception of his art. As a result of his remarkable appearance and outspoken behavior, Whistler became one of the most recognizable figures of the Victorian era. Fashionable portraitists and illustrators depicted his public side in the guise of the society dandy or intellectual aesthete. Some of these works are casual sketches; others are life-size canvases. While caricaturists lampooned his carefully devised public persona, fellow artists recorded Whistler's personal life—at work in the studio, at home in the garden, or among friends in cafés. In addition to these depictions by his contemporaries, Whistler executed many self-portraits.

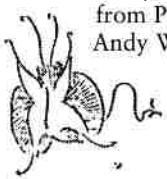
White Ducks, or The Five Faces of Whistler by Mortimer Menpes. Etching, not dated. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City; gift of Paul F. Walter, 1985

Whistler Standing in the Paris Studio by Dornac Studio. Albumen print, 1899. A. E. Gallatin Collection, The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, The New York Public Library, New York City, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

James McNeill Whistler
by J. Bernard Partridge
(1861–1945). Watercolor,
not dated. National
Portrait Gallery, London;
gift of Mrs. L. M. Lamont

Evolving Appearance
Whistler's appearance changed considerably over the fifty-nine years covered by this exhibition. He is first seen as an attractive youth, carefully posed for the camera and the portraitist; his familiar features are crowned by a shock of dark, curly hair. Other characteristics gained prominence during his student years—a slim build, the mustache, the monocle, and a straw hat. Whistler adopted various fashions of dress distinctive to specific periods, sometimes including a cane or gloves. The white lock of hair appeared around 1870 and became a reliable part of the Whistler image. Photographs betrayed signs of age beginning in the 1880s, despite his attempts to disguise the passage of time.

The Artist Redefined
The portraits and articles about Whistler in the popular press helped define a new type of artist for Victorian England—someone who was a celebrity and an independent intellectual, free from conventional criticism and unfettered by the mores of traditional upper-class society. Whistler worked diligently to create and promote this persona. His distinctive appearance and notable wit were displayed in galleries, clubs, cafés, and most conspicuously in the law courts. Whistler maintained a high public profile, even if the results of that visibility were not always flattering. He played a vital part in the much broader cultural shift toward a celebration of individualism, a philosophy that contributed to the burgeoning cult of personality in Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Notoriety and its attendant publicity were a part of this phenomenon. Whistler's sense of the importance of publicity anticipates its significance for twentieth-century artists, ranging from Pablo Picasso to Andy Warhol.



The Evolution of the Butterfly

Beginning in the late 1860s, Whistler started to sign his paintings and prints with a new signature, comprised of his initials, JMW. The letters were combined into the form of an insect that at first resembled a dragonfly, but soon developed into a butterfly. Whistler adopted the motif as his signature in his correspondence at about the same time, and he later often referred to himself as "the butterfly." As time passed, the design of the butterfly evolved, becoming a versatile symbol representing the artist. Writers and caricaturists readily embraced it and used it when writing of the artist. Several of the portraits in this exhibition make reference to the butterfly or incorporate it with Whistler's likeness.

"In Pursuit of the Butterfly" is a selection of portraits depicting Whistler engaged in various activities at different times in his life, as seen through the eyes of his fellow artists, such as Walter Greaves, Mortimer Menpes, and John White Alexander—the painters and draftsmen of the Victorian age. As a group, these portraits offer a rich and complex picture of Whistler as an artist, in direct contrast with the well-known images of Whistler as a dandy.

Eric Denker

Exhibition curator Eric Denker will lead "In Pursuit of the Butterfly: Whistler and His World," a walking tour of the exhibition, on Thursday, April 20, Saturday, April 22, Thursday, June 22, and Saturday, June 24. Tours meet at noon at the National Portrait Gallery's Information Desk.

Other Whistler exhibitions being held in Washington:

Freer Gallery of Art:
"Whistler & Japan,"
May 14, 1995–January 1, 1996

National Gallery of Art:
"James McNeill Whistler,"
May 28–August 20, 1995

"Prints by James McNeill Whistler and His Contemporaries,"
June 18–September 4, 1995

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In Pursuit of the Butterfly: Portraits of James McNeill Whistler by Eric Denker is available in the National Portrait Gallery's shop.

Cover: *James McNeill Whistler* by Giovanni Boldini. Oil on canvas, 1897. The Brooklyn Museum; gift of A. Augustus Healy (09.849)

Butterfly image courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution

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